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ABSTRACT

This brief explores the challenges of documenting dropout rates and ways to support students with disabilities so that they meet academic standards and graduate. It begins by discussing the high dropout rate for students with disabilities and the rise of standards-based reform and high-stakes tests. Characteristics of high-risk students are identified and include living in the southern and western regions of the country or large urban center, having a disability, coming from low-income families and communities, and having a non-European American or non-Asian, single parent background. The difficulties of measuring and defining dropout rates are explored, and sources of variation in reported dropout rates are identified. Findings from three projects that investigated successfully implemented interventions for preventing student dropouts are then discussed. Intervention strategies included: (1) persistence, continuity, and consistency; (2) monitoring the occurrence of risk behaviors and the effects of interventions; (3) a caring relationship between an adult connected to the school and the student; (4) a sense of belonging to school that was encouraged through participation in school-related activities; and (5) problem-solving skills were taught and supported so students were able to survive in challenging environments. The brief closes with a discussion of research needs. (Contains 17 references.) (CR)

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Issue Brief

Examining Current Challenges in Secondary Education and Transition

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National Center on Secondary Education and Transition

Creating Opportunities for Youth With Disabilities to Achieve Successful Futures

A partnership of —

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Students with Disabilities who Drop Out of School—Implications for Policy and Practice

By Martha L. Thurlow, Mary F. Sinclair, and David R. Johnson

Issue: Amid new school accountability policies and stiffer promotion and graduation requirements, what interventions work to lower an unacceptably high dropout rate for students with disabilities?

Defining the Issue

The dropout rate for students with disabilities is approximately twice that of general education students (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). Increased concerns about the dropout problem are now emerging because of state and local education agency experiences with high-stakes accountability in the context of standards-based reform. States and school districts have identified what students should know and be able to do, and have implemented assessments to ensure that students have attained the identified knowledge and skills. Large numbers of students, however, are not faring well on these assessments. For youth with disabilities, several factors beyond academic achievement influence their ability to pass these assessments: accurate identification of the disability, provision of needed accommodations, and educational supports that make learning possible regardless of disability-related factors. In particular, the provision of accommodations assures that a student's true academic skills are measured in assessments, rather than elements of the disability.

Students with disabilities are included in the "all students" agenda of federal, state, and district standards-based reforms, and have been identified as being among the lowest performing students on current high-stakes tests. These scores have consequences for schools and often for students.

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Under the Title I requirements of the *No Child Left Behind* Act, schools will be identified as needing improvement if their overall performance does not increase on a yearly basis—or if any of a number of subgroups does not make "adequate yearly progress." Students with disabilities comprise one of these subgroups to be included in accountability systems. If they do not perform well, what incentives do schools have to go the extra mile to retain these youth? Is it possible that schools and the educators within them may encourage special education students to seek alternative programs and leave their buildings—essentially pushing students with disabilities to drop out of school?

Increasingly, high-stakes tests have significant consequences for students—they determine whether they are promoted from one grade to the next, or graduate from high school with a standard diploma (Thurlow & Johnson, 2000). Students who experience failure or who see little chance of passing these tests may decide not to stay in school—because either they will not be promoted or they will not graduate with a standard diploma.

Accountability without the necessary opportunities and support for youth with disabilities to achieve high standards may increase the rate at which they drop out of school and fail to successfully complete school. It is important to determine the best way to keep track of the extent to which students with disabilities are dropping out of school, as well as to study ways to keep students in school. This *Issue Brief* explores the challenges of documenting dropout rates and ways to support students with disabilities so that they meet academic standards and graduate. It is expected that if students are engaged in school and are learning, they will successfully complete school with the academic and social skills they need to be successful adults.

Framing the Problem

The Context

Within the context of American schooling, there have been dramatic changes in who is expected to complete school. In the early 1900s, 96% of individuals 18 years and older had not completed high school. By the 1960s, the public school system had reduced noncompletion rates to 25% among the same age group. Today's rate of not completing high school is even lower, averaging about 14% of all youth 18 years and older (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999). Of those who do not complete high school, about 36% are students with learning disabilities and 59% are students with emotional/behavioral disabilities (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). Furthermore, today's world is different from that of the early 1900s. The United States is no longer an agrarian community in which most individuals tend farms or fill jobs not requiring a high school diploma. Today, the United States exists within a global community in which the needed skills are ever increasing, and most jobs require at least a high school diploma.

American society has decided that it can no longer afford to have students drop out of school because of the serious implications for social stability and economic development. Youth who drop out generally experience negative outcomes—unemployment, underemployment, and incarceration. School dropouts report unemployment rates as much as 40% higher than youth who have completed school. Arrest rates are alarming for youth with disabilities who drop out of school—73% for students with emotional/behavioral disabilities and 62% for students with learning disabilities. More than 80% of individuals incarcerated are high school dropouts (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1995). When taxpayers spend approximately $51,000 per year to incarcerate one person, compared to approximately $11,500 to educate one child with a disability, the cost effectiveness of high school graduation is obvious.

While the dropout problem exists throughout the United States, it is worse in some areas of the U.S. and among some specific populations of students. High-risk areas include the southern and western regions of the country, and large urban centers. Populations placed at high risk include youth with disabilities, students from low-income families and communities, and students with non-European American or non-Asian, single parent backgrounds. When differences

in the "high risk" indicators of gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status are controlled, youth with disabilities are among those at greatest risk for dropping out of school.

Conceptual Orientation

Dropping out is the outcome of a long process of disengagement and alienation, preceded by less severe types of withdrawal such as truancy and course failures (Finn, 1989,1993). Appreciation has grown for viewing the path to dropping out as complex and multidimensional, and for focusing on family and school variables in efforts to reduce dropout rates (Egyed, McIntosh, & Bull, 1998; Finn, 1993). Four broad intervention components are important in enhancing student motivation to stay in school and work hard: opportunities for success in schoolwork, a caring and supportive environment, clear communication of the relevance of education to future endeavors, and addressing students' personal problems (McPartland, 1994).

Measurement and Definitional Considerations

Although it is easy to talk about dropout rates, it is not as easy to keep track of them. Tracking special education dropout rates is especially challenging. Yet such information is critical in communicating the significant dropout problems of youth with disabilities to Congressional and state legislative bodies, state and local administrators, and the general public.

There have been numerous attempts to identify the best definition of the dropout rate (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000), but these definitions have varied according to the purpose of calculating dropout rates as well as according to the ways in which data can be collected.

Three kinds of dropout rate statistics are used—event rates, status rates, and cohort rates. Each of these has a different definition, and produces a different dropout rate (see Table 1). Generally, event rate formulas yield dropout rates that are smaller than those from status rates and cohort formulas.

The most common sources of variation in reported dropout rates are: (a) the accounting period for calculating the dropout rate; (b) how long it takes for an unexplained absence to be counted as dropping out; (c) inaccurate data reporting, resulting in duplicate counts of students; (d) the grade levels included in calculating dropout rates; (e) the ages of students who can be classified as dropouts; and (f) whether students who attend alternative educational settings are considered as enrolled in school. Some of these sources of variation are due to difficulty in keeping track of students, technical incompatibility of different data management systems, and financial constraints (Williams, 1987). These types of variation in calculations result in some students being excluded from dropout counts. In addition, who is excluded varies from one state or school district to the next.

The definition of "dropout" and the data sources currently used by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) differs from the definition used by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Common Core of Data (CCD), significantly compromising the capacity to make accurate comparisons of special education and general education dropout numbers. This exacerbates efforts to chart the necessary and highly important progress of students with disabilities in relation to their peers without disabilities.

What We Know

Regardless of how the dropout rate is calculated, whether following a class of students over a few years or examining a particular age group, students with disabilities drop out at much higher rates than other students. This may be understandable, but not acceptable, given what is known about variables that are related to dropping out of school.

Research has identified a consistent set of variables related to the tendency for a student to drop out of school. Some of these variables can be altered, and others, called status variables, are unlikely to change (see Table 2).

The variables shown in Table 2 are examples and by no means exhaustive. In fact, for each of the variables, it is possible to identify both a risk factor (e.g., a single parent family) and a protective factor (e.g., a two parent family). These factors are, of course, generalizations because variables interact with each other to create greater or lesser risk or greater or lesser protection. Still, recognizing the difference between those

Table 1: Dropout Rate Statistics

Type of Dropout Statistic	Definition	Relative Value
Event Rate (Annual rate; Incidence rate)	Measures the proportion of students who drop out in a single year without completing high school	Smallest number
Status Rate (Prevalence rate)	Measures the proportion of students who have not completed high school and are not enrolled at one point in time, regardless of when they dropped out	Between event and cohort rates
Cohort Rate (Longitudinal rate)	Measures what happens to a single group (or cohort) of students over a period of time	Largest rate

Source: National Center for Education Studies (1993-2001)

variables that educators and others can influence and those that are static is important when thinking about interventions for curtailing dropout rates of students with disabilities.

In the early 1990s, three projects funded by OSEP successfully implemented interventions to prevent student dropouts among those students with disabilities who were at greatest risk—those with learning disabilities and those with emotional or behavioral disabilities. These projects carefully tracked students so that they knew who continued in school and who dropped out. Five intervention strategies used by the projects helped to prevent school dropouts among a high risk population (Thurlow, Christenson, Sinclair, Evelo, & Thornton, 1995):

- **Persistence, Continuity, and Consistency**—these were always provided in concurrently, to show students that there was someone who was not going to give up on them or allow them to be distracted from school, that there was someone who knew the student and was available to them throughout the school year, the summer, and into the next school year, and that there was a common message about the need to stay in school.
- **Monitoring**—the occurrence of risk behaviors (e.g., skipped classes, tardiness, absenteeism, behavioral referrals, suspensions, poor academic performance) was consistently tracked, as were the effects of interventions in response to risk behaviors.
- **Relationships**—a caring relationship between an adult connected to the school and the student was established.
- **Affiliation**—a sense of belonging to school was encouraged through participation in school-related activities.

Table 2: Examples of Status and Alterable Variables

Class of Variables	Status Variables	Alterable Variables
Student	Disability (e.g., LD, EBD)	Attendance (e.g., sporadic)
Family	Structure (e.g., single parent family)	Supervision of free time (e.g., rarely occurs)
Peers	Intelligence (e.g., low IQ)	Identification with school (e.g., alienated)
School	Socioeconomic Status (e.g., living in poverty)	Monitoring of Student Progress (e.g., consistently occurs)
Community	Geographic Features (e.g., urban)	Support Services (e.g., available)

Source: Christenson, Sinclair, & Hurley (2000)

- **Problem-Solving Skills**—skills students need for solving a variety of problems were taught and supported so students were able to survive in challenging school, home, and community environments.

Check and Connect, one of the three projects, was located in Minneapolis, where the dropout rate among students with learning and emotional/behavioral disabilities was well over 50%. Focusing first on middle school students, the project used systematic procedures for **checking** (continuous monitoring of tardiness, skipped classes, absenteeism, behavior referrals, detention, suspensions, course failures, accrual of credits) to identify students with high risk levels, and **connecting** (through two levels of intervention—*basic*, consisting of regular core connect strategies, and *intensive*, consisting of in-depth problem-solving, academic support, and exploration of recreation and community services). For students who continued in the Check and Connect intervention through ninth grade, the project found significant evidence of treatment effects—9% had dropped out of school, compared to 30% of students who received interventions only in seventh and eighth grades; 46% of these students were on track to graduate in four years (68% in five years), compared to 20% of control group students in four years and (29% in five years) (Sinclair, Christenson, Evelo, & Hurley, 1998).

After the completion of the initial project, which focused on middle school students through ninth grade, project researchers expanded their efforts to the high school level, and then down to elementary schools. This expansion highlighted the benefits of targeting dropout prevention efforts toward youth with disabili-

ties, indicating that elementary school is where dropout prevention strategies need to start, and also that high school students involved in systematic dropout prevention efforts are more likely to stay in school and to influence their own transition plans for later success. Still, the projects identified numerous barriers (e.g., lack of communication, punitive discipline) that can tip the balance away from existing supports (e.g., true teaming, afterschool activities) (Christenson, Sinclair, Thurlow, & Evelo, 1995). The Check and Connect project produced a manual so that other districts and schools could adapt and implement the check and connect procedure (Evelo, Sinclair, Hurley, Christenson, & Thurlow, 1996). It identified numerous strategies for moving beyond the procedures of Check and Connect—strategies that view parents and the community as partners in the effort to keep kids in school.

A number of other successful models exist to prevent dropouts and to encourage dropout reentry. Among these are programs funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) in the U.S. Department of Education, and the Employment and Training Administration (ETA), U.S. Department of Labor. In a recent nationwide analysis of dropout programs (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2002), three distinct approaches and models were identified. These include: (1) supplemental services for at-risk students (e.g., mentoring, tutoring, counseling, and social support services); (2) different forms of alternative education programs for students who do not do well in regular classrooms (e.g., career academies, some charter school options, other alternative education schools); and (3) schoolwide restructuring efforts for all students (e.g., school within a school, adaptations to school schedules, freshman academy). While providing promise for what can be done and what can be learned, these models also identify continuing challenges to preventing dropouts and maintaining engagement of youth in schools. Questions must also be raised as to the direct and meaningful application of these approaches and models in addressing the needs of special education students.

What We Need to Know

Despite the progress made in decreasing dropout rates, the new context of standards-based reforms and associated high-stakes testing raises new questions and new issues. Among several critical next steps are the following:

- Explore and examine possible common definitions of dropping out of school and completing school for general education and special education students.
- Identify, document, and widely disseminate research-based information on best practices in dropout prevention and intervention, including models developed by OERI, OSEP, ETA, and other organizations.
- Continue to demonstrate and validate new dropout prevention and intervention strategies that work with particularly high risk groups of students (e.g., students with emotional disabilities, minority students, students living in poverty, etc.).
- Explicitly investigate the impact of new accountability forces (e.g., high stakes testing, stiffer graduation requirements, varied diploma options) on the exit status and school completion of youth with disabilities.
- Maximize the use of newly funded longitudinal studies (e.g., National Transition Longitudinal Study-2 and Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study) to examine the relationships among students' engagement with school and critical contextual variables of home, school, community, and peers in association with students' status of exit from school.

As noted recently by the U.S. General Accounting Office (2002), the multiple adverse consequences of dropping out of school are too significant to ignore. Continued efforts in this area, particularly in relation to students with disabilities, are imperative.

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